

# Marxism and Kazantzakis

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I fight to embrace the entire circle of human activity to the full extent of my ability, to divine which wind is urging all these waves of mankind upward. I bend over the age in which I live, that tiny, imperceptible arc of the vast circle, and struggle to attain a clear view of today's duty. Perhaps this is the only way man can carry out something immortal within the ephemeral moment of his life: immortal because he collaborates with an immortal rhythm.

*Report to Greco*

The name of Nikos Kazantzakis continues to arouse controversy. Much of it, especially in Greece, is political in nature and revolves around the confusion concerning Kazantzakis' relation to Marxism. The confusion arises because of the ways Kazantzakis' activities and writings have been interpreted. For example, even before the latest military regime in Greece and while he was still alive, Kazantzakis was anathema to the royalists. Consecutive right wing governments, both before and after World War II, waged war against him and his books; he was called immoral, red, and a Bolshevik trouble-maker.<sup>1</sup> In the fall of 1924, in his native Crete, he was actually

1. In a letter dated 18 December 1953 from Amsterdam, Kazantzakis complained to his intimate friend Pandelis Prevelakis that the Swedish Academy, responsible for the Nobel Prize, was being bombarded with letters by Greeks against him. In the same letter he wrote that a representative of the

arrested. In the spring of 1928, in Athens, he was accused of being a Russian agent.<sup>2</sup> Yet his books were banned in Russia—particularly those he wrote about that country—and the Greek Communist party refused to include him in its ranks, labelling him bourgeois, decadent and even fascist. In fact, his offer to join the communist controlled resistance in the 1940s was rejected. Such responses neither prevented the International Peace Committee from offering him the Peace Award in Vienna in 1956 nor did it bar the Chinese communists from inviting him to the Peoples' Republic of China as one of their 'chosen Foreigners' and, upon the occasion of his death in 1957, from praising him: 'Kazantzakis was not only a great writer. He was actively interested in social and political issues. He was also a devotee of peace'.<sup>3</sup> More recently, views about him have ranged from those in which he is considered an egomaniac, oblivious to the fate of others, a man whom 'the really important things—political tyranny, social injustice, economic exploitation—interested . . . the least',<sup>4</sup> to those in which he is seen as an advocate of equality, peace and the cooperation of the world's people, one who to the end of his career sided with the 'ideas of genuine Democracy and Socialism'.<sup>5</sup>

By examining Kazantzakis' views in connection with Marxism and by delineating his attitude and approach to the subject—'a very complicated affair',<sup>6</sup> as he himself put it—an attempt will be made to clear up the confusing and even antithetical interpretations about his views, and thus to eliminate some of

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Greek intellectuals had told the Swedish king and members of the Academy that 'I am a communist and corrupt Greek youth and that it would be a humiliation to Greece were my person honoured with the Nobel Prize'. *Τετρακόσια γράμματα του Κазαντζάκη στον Πρεβελάκη*, ed. P. Prevelakis (Athens, 1965), p. 649.

2. *Αναγέννηση*, April 1928, p. 380.

3. From an article by Emi Sao in the *People's Daily*, XXI (Peking, 1957). Reprinted in Greek as 'A Gentle Fighter', *Καινούργια Έποχή*, Fall, 1958, 158–9.

4. See the incident related by P. Bien in 'Nikos Kazantzakis', *The Politics of Twentieth-Century Novelists*, ed. G. Panichas (New York, 1971), pp. 137–8.

5. N. D. Pouliopoulos, *Ο Νίκος Κазαντζάκης και τα παγκόσμια ιδεολογικά ρεύματα*, I (Athens, 1972), p. 17.

6. *Τετρακόσια γράμματα*, p. 150.

the prejudices that continue to plague the name of the greatest man of letters of modern Greece.

I will do this first by providing evidence of Kazantzakis' affinities with Marxism; secondly, I will outline his basic disagreements with, criticisms of and objections to Marxism, objections which seem to be in conflict with his expressed espousal. Out of these seemingly contradictory positions I will present what appears to me to be the truth concerning his relation to Marxism. Finally, I will argue that this true relation did not alter during his lifetime; I will emphasize that it was not one stage, among others, punctuating his development, but that it constituted a facet of his variegated yet organically unified thought.

## I

Kazantzakis' affinities with Marxism began when he was a student in Paris. There he had become acquainted with, and was impressed by, young French socialists. However, as his newspaper dispatches of those years show, his main attraction to socialism was limited to its being a substitute for the decaying values of Christianity: 'The socialists address themselves to the needs of contemporary man because they base their programme on the death of Christian otherworldliness. They attempt to improve this life since none other exists'.<sup>7</sup> His early flirtation with French socialism did not last long because he was not only influenced by Nietzsche, but also consumed by zeal for his own country. In the 1910s, under the influence of I. Dragoumis and E. Venizelos, and caught by the fervour of Greece's recovery of its lands from the Turks, he became involved in rehabilitating Greece primarily through educational reforms. In 1919, as Director General of the Ministry of Welfare, he successfully undertook the repatriation of 150,000 Greeks from the Caucasus.

However, he would not remain long in Greece. The year 1920 was arduous both for him and his country. Dragoumis was assassinated; Venizelos fell from power. Dissatisfied with the Greek political situation, Kazantzakis travelled to Vienna; his

7. *Παρισινὰ γράμματα: 'Η ἐξέγερσις τοῦ σοσιαλισμοῦ, Νέον Ἄστυ*, November 1907, reprinted in *Νέα Ἑστία*, 15 August 1958, 12–13.

attention turned towards the Soviet Union. The attraction of the 'Russian experiment' was powerful, and the Vienna of 1921 provided scenes that propelled Kazantzakis to search for a robust unapologetic communism. Witness the correspondence with his first wife. Referring to the experiences of misery and indignity he observed in post-World War I Vienna he writes:

Now with our new perception [the acceptance of communist ideas] you don't know with what emotion I see the people here suffering from hunger and despair. What unhappiness, my God, and how long will it last? Today, for example, I went to buy a newspaper, and a little girl of about fourteen entered with a sack full of packages which she was carrying on her back. I went to help her unload it and I couldn't lift it. The little girl smiled, but her body was already deformed, her shoulders hunched, her legs were like reeds. . . .

I look at the paintings, the beautiful bibelots, that are in the shop windows. At another time, as early even as last year, they used to give me joy. Now I feel how unnatural they are, superficial masks to hide the truth. Seductive personae for the cowards. My God! I shout inside me while walking the broad avenues, when are you going to descend like a tempestuous wind, like the Great One who descends from the mountain tops of Parnassus, to clear up the earth.<sup>8</sup>

Six months later his letters continue in the same vein. Describing the social conditions in Vienna he writes: 'Here we have children who gather around the entrances of big hotels and as soon as the door is left open they run under the tables and pick up the crumbs. And next to them we have the shamelessness of the rich, gypsy music, dances, cabarets and the people red-faced and fat from steaks.'<sup>9</sup>

In the same month he puts the contrast in political terms and for the first time informs us of his initiation into communist circles:

I have found a man to get me in touch with the local communists. . . . I hope to see the overthrow here soon. It is

8. *Ἐπιστολές πρὸς τὴ Γαλάτεια* (Athens, 1958), pp. 18–21.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

impossible to imagine the intensity which the horror has reached. . . .<sup>10</sup>

As these tumultuous years pass by, as the shame and suffering he witnesses in Vienna become his own, as his 'thirst for justice' increases, we hear him become more and more immersed in communist ideas and see him possessed by the revolutionary fervour enveloping the Germany of that time. Moving from Vienna to Berlin, he joins a group of rebels and soon renews his plans already begun in Vienna for the publication of a leftist periodical, *Nova Graecia*, 'in order to initiate from here the coming awakening—the human one'.<sup>11</sup> He reads communist books, participates in street demonstrations, and expresses his opinions at meetings of communists and extreme socialists. Of these meetings he writes to his wife: 'the others insist principally on the cultivation of selected intellectuals who will be able to handle philosophical, scientific, cultural, etc., themes from a communist, Marxist perspective. I insist on the necessity of leaving alone for now all these intellectual luxuries and of seeing how we would address ourselves (1) to the people in general, (2) to the workers in particular, (3) to the children.'<sup>12</sup>

Even after he leaves Berlin in 1924, and travels through Germany and northern Italy to Assisi, his letters continue to express his mounting enthusiasm for what he had initially called his 'new perception': communism. He hopes to fight against 'decadence and misery'. He writes disparagingly of the 'dishonourable capitalistic system' that governs France.<sup>13</sup> Later from Assisi, he goes as far as to refer to Saint Francis as 'a great, an ideal communist. He saw that the source of all evil is private property.'<sup>14</sup> He speaks of his new development, his awakening to internationalism, in terms that he will staunchly advocate throughout his life:

In the beginning men care only for their ego, then for their family and their home, and then for the race and the fatherland. Lastly they care for Man himself. There always

10. Ibid., p. 26.

11. Ibid., p. 34.

12. Ibid., p. 194.

13. Ibid., p. 78.

14. Ibid., p. 258.

existed men, in all epochs, from Prometheus to Lenin, who fought for Man. But their struggle was isolated, scattered, luciferian; they did not carry along the masses. Now we must struggle to consolidate this new army, to teach (by first giving the example) the world's people to breathe outside of their borders and to feel pain and joy when the men in Russia and China feel pain and joy.<sup>15</sup>

Later, reflecting a developing consciousness of history, he refers to our times as those of a new Middle Age which must be gone through before the appearance of a new, free, higher civilization.<sup>16</sup>

In 1924 this correspondence ceased; Kazantzakis left southern Italy for Crete. It was in Crete that his sentiments for socialist causes were publicly expressed. The consequence was a strong reaction on the part of the authorities. At Herakleion, carried off by his enthusiasm and his Messianic spirit, he became involved with the local communists in what the authorities viewed as an illegal political action, and was arrested. However, what is of interest to us here is neither the action in which he took part nor the fact of his being accused, but the 'Confession of Faith' which he submitted to the examining magistrate of Herakleion when he was arrested as a communist. This 'confession' was to become his 'Apology'.

In this document the thoughts which Kazantzakis had expressed at times desultorily in his letters, mingled as they were with so many other issues and private concerns, became summarized and crystallized into a clear statement. In it he states unambiguously that the established bourgeois system is no longer capable of adjusting itself to contemporary needs and the concerns of society. Economically, this system is based on predatory private relations of production and on the unequal distribution of wealth; socially, there does not exist a single ethos to support the relations between men; politically, the ruling class administers political power for its own benefit and at the expense of the majority. Moreover, he continues, there does not exist in the bourgeois system a lofty ideal, a faith, a supra-personal rhythm which can give dignity and cohesion to the

15. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 201–2.

activities and energies of individuals and nations. Granting that the bourgeois class, having overturned feudalism, contributed admirably to thought, art, science and action, he observes that now it has embarked on its fateful, downward curve. Although we may not clearly perceive this curve (since we are living in it) two different kinds of endeavours are becoming obvious. On the one hand, there are those who are struggling to overturn and replace this situation with 'a new system, which, they are convinced, is more just and more honourable'.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, according to Kazantzakis, the bourgeoisie are fighting a well-expected but losing battle. They disregarded the implacable and vital historical laws of birth, growth and decline. They hope that now, for the first time in history, their class can be maintained forever in power—a vain miracle. Yet what kind of class will succeed the bourgeoisie? He answers:

I have the adamantine conviction that it will be the working class: workers, farmers, people productive in the spirit. This class has passed the first stage—Charity. It no longer, as a century ago, kowtows to the charity of the rich people, no longer begs for alms. And then it passed the second stage—Justice; no longer is it demanding to seize the ruling power because that is right. And now it has reached the third and final stage; it is convinced that it will assume the ruling power, because such is the historical necessity.<sup>18</sup>

He now considered it his duty to make his contemporaries aware of the 'new rhythm of on-going life. How? By articulating a clear idea of the historical moment we are passing through, by enlightening the people and by giving a new and loftier content to the conceptions of work, justice, virtue.'<sup>19</sup>

Kazantzakis thought he could bring about that awareness in himself by first forming a clear and impartial idea of 'the greatest contemporary problem which regulates our era—the Russian problem'.<sup>20</sup> But he had to see with his own eyes, get his own impressions, form his own thoughts. For he felt that

17. A translation of the 'Apology' is appended at the end of *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography*, by Helen Kazantzakis, trans. by Amy Mims (New York, 1968), p. 566.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 566.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 568.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 569.

unlike other times of calmness when one had the right to withdraw into solitude, 'at the critical moment in which we are living, I knew it was man's duty to take, in full consciousness and with decisiveness, a stand—to the left or right—in the universal battle'. It would have been 'abominable cowardice', he concludes in the 'Apology', to do otherwise. In October 1925 he left for Russia.

The tone of his letters, the explicit statements of his 'Apology', his three trips to Russia, his activities there and in Greece, reveal his growing loyalties and forcefully challenge the accusation that the Greek writer was oblivious to the fate of others and uninterested in political tyranny, social injustice and economic exploitation. As we have seen, it was precisely such interests, triggered as they were by the social, political and economic conditions in Germany and Vienna in the early 1920s, that engendered his Marxist sentiments and forged his initial commitments to Lenin and the Russian Revolution.

On his second visit to Russia, as an officially invited guest to the tenth anniversary of the revolution, he participated in the pro-communist World Congress by expressing his convictions about one of the main issues discussed: the threat of a new world war. He disagreed with the prevalent view among the delegates that such a war should be avoided by organizing the world proletariat to refuse to fight against each other. He argued, to the contrary, that there was only one thing that the world proletariat could and must do: prepare for it and, when it came, turn the capitalist war into a social one.<sup>21</sup>

Later, in Greece, with Panait Istrati<sup>22</sup> (a writer and a new-

21. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Ταξιδεύοντας: Πουστά*, 5th ed. (Athens, 1969), p. 68. It is important to note that Kazantzakis' impressions of Russia were first published in 1926 in articles for the Athenian newspaper *Ἐλεύθερος Λόγος*. These articles were subsequently published in two volumes entitled *Τί εἶδα στὴ Πουστά*. Kazantzakis published the one volume edition entitled *Ταξιδεύοντας: Πουστά* in 1928 soon after his return from his last trip to the Soviet Union.

22. Panait Istrati was a Greek-Rumanian writer who was introduced to the literary world of France by Romain Rolland as the 'Gorki of the Balkans' and who was loved by the European public for his stories about his own vagrant life. At the very height of his fame, we are told by Kazantzakis himself, 'in one of his articles in *L'Humanité*, full of indignation and disgust, he bade goodbye to Western Civilization, rotting in dishonour and injustice, and took refuge in a new land, where he could live and work . . . in Russia'. *Πρώτα*, 31 December 1927.



found friend) and D. Glynos (the leading intellectual of the left at the time) Kazantzakis organized a large meeting at the Alhambra theatre where both he and Istrati spoke. Their speeches touched a revolutionary nerve in the audience which, applauding and shouting, marched to the centre of Athens singing the 'Third International'. Three days after the Alhambra incident the public prosecutor ordered an investigation of the three agitators, accusing Istrati of being a communist agent. Istrati was asked to leave the country and a trial date was set for Glynos and Kazantzakis, but it was repeatedly postponed and finally forgotten.<sup>23</sup>

In the spring of 1928 Kazantzakis met again with Istrati in Kiev. Together they planned to journey through the entire country and write articles for the world press. The articles were to be about the struggle of 'crucified Russia' and plans were made to have them published in three volumes entitled 'Following the Red Star'. To this end, in Borjom and later in Tiflis, Kazantzakis wrote some forty articles. 'I am going to send most of them,' he wrote to Prevelakis, 'to *Nouvelles Littéraires*, but do not know whether they will publish them, as for them they are revolutionary; here in Russia they are regarded as *mystiques*.'<sup>24</sup>

However, these articles were never published. By the time Kazantzakis and Istrati reached Leningrad, Istrati underwent a test of faith which had been brewing for some time; the two friends became estranged.<sup>25</sup> The crisis developed when the Soviet government officially accused Istrati's old friend, the Russian writer Victor Serge, of Trotskyism. Istrati was outraged. He violently protested to the government, met with officials, and spoke to party members—to no avail. Serge was exiled; his

23. See Helen Kazantzakis' 'Afterword', *Toda Raba* (New York, 1964), p. 210. For further details concerning the whole incident see N. Vrettakos, 'Ο Νίκος Καζαντζάκης: Η άγωνία του και τὸ ἔργο του' (Athens, 1960), pp. 140–1.

24. P. Prevelakis, *Nikos Kazantzakis and His Odyssey: A Study of the Poet and the Poem*, trans. by P. Sherrard (New York, 1961), p. 136.

25. Both the deep temperamental differences between the two friends as well as Kazantzakis' views about the world in general and Russia in particular—views of which we will speak later and which had a negative influence on Istrati—helped bring about the crisis and Istrati's journey. See Kazantzakis' letters of that period in *Τετρακόσια γράμματα*. Aspects of Kazantzakis' discussions with Istrati on Russia and communism were dramatized in *Toda Raba* in the conversation between Geranos and Azad.

wife went mad, his family was literally abandoned to the streets. Istrati was heartbroken. His hopes about Russia shattered, he angrily withdrew the vow, given no more than a year ago, to serve Russia to the end of his life.<sup>26</sup> Returning to Paris, he destroyed all the articles written by Kazantzakis and co-signed by him which were intended for publication in European periodicals.

Kazantzakis was no doubt disturbed by Serge's fate and the whole 'Rusakov Affair', as it came to be called. Yet the point from which Kazantzakis was viewing Bolshevik Russia was too encompassing to let this incident and others like it affect his overall position vis-à-vis the 'Russian experiment'. Unlike Istrati, who all too soon became disillusioned by the Russian reality, Kazantzakis did not consider this a fixed state of affairs. It was still fluid, still 'in a state of becoming. The Russian reality is replete with contradictions, facts that are logically inexplicable and remnants of all realities. . . . Things are just beginning to live and still have all the awkwardness, the complexity and the charm of a newborn baby.'<sup>27</sup> And in a section in *Toda Raba* which no doubt refers to the time just before Istrati's departure, Kazantzakis, reflecting on his friend's all too human reaction, has Geranos say: 'Beyond logic, beyond discussions and disputes, beyond economic needs and party programmes, higher than the Soviets and the Commissars, the force at work in the U.S.S.R. and controlling it is the dark, intemperate, ruthless Spirit of our age.'<sup>28</sup>

Such words make clear that Kazantzakis was interested not in Soviet Communism as such, not in a dogmatic intellectual Marxism but in the revolutionary spirit he saw at work in Russia. 'It is not Russia that interests me', Geranos says in *Toda Raba*, 'but the flame consuming Russia.'<sup>29</sup> In a letter from Moscow in 1925, a month before he concluded his first trip to the Soviet Union, Kazantzakis expressed the same sentiment when he wrote that what moved him in Russia was not 'the reality they

26. Nikos Kazantzakis and *His Odyssey*, Greek edition (Athens, 1958), p. 322, n. 245.

27. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Toda Raba*, trans. by Amy Mims (New York, 1964), p. 63. Conceived on his second trip to Russia this book was first published in French in 1938.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

had achieved but the reality which they long for and do not know that they cannot achieve.'<sup>30</sup>

Kazantzakis' attitude towards Russia and communism—an attitude which grew out of his horror at the injustices he found in the capitalist system—illuminates his affinity for communism and seems to warrant the identification of him as 'red' and 'bolshevik'.

## II

In spite of Kazantzakis' seeming allegiances to the 'Russian Experiment' and the great importance he attached to communism, the communists also had something on their side when they rejected him as bourgeois and decadent and when the Russian government prohibited the circulation of his books; for he was never a communist. It is this simple fact that presents us with difficulties in assessing his relation to Marxism and continues to confuse matters regarding his position.

The explicit statement in *Toda Raba*, that he was not a party member blinded by a complacent faith, is not the only evidence of his not being a communist.<sup>31</sup> In a letter to Prevelakis in 1936 explaining his 'spiritual longitude and latitude', he wrote that although he belonged to the left wing he was 'never a communist'.<sup>32</sup> And in a conversation with Istrati which he recorded in his *Russia*, he denied the latter's claim that he, Kazantzakis, was a Marxist.<sup>33</sup>

It is simplistic and debatable to say with Prevelakis that the reason Kazantzakis was not a communist was because 'the narrow-minded and strong communist dedicated to action . . . , [the] person who disposed of metaphysics and was ignorant of the inner life and who mocked at the adventure of love . . . ', that this kind of man, 'the new type of man produced in Russia appalled him'.<sup>34</sup> Ample evidence in his writing suggests that far from being appalled by the man of action, Kazantzakis had a great and lasting admiration for him. Although he himself was nurtured by western art and

30. *Nikos Kazantzakis: a Biography*, p. 135.

31. *Toda Raba*, p. 117.

32. *Nikos Kazantzakis and His Odyssey*, p. 160.

33. *Povota*, p. 338.

34. *Nikos Kazantzakis and His Odyssey*, p. 129.

philosophy, and may have even, as Prevelakis put it, ‘personified broad polyhedral thought’, he often spoke with sarcasm and derision about the ‘metaphysical problem’<sup>35</sup> and about the atrophied western intellectuals (like the Boss in *Zorba the Greek*) whose neutrality, objectivity and non-involvement were fostering the decadence of western civilization. Witness the important essay sent to Prevelakis in the form of a letter in which he stresses that as a result of his trips to Russia he had ultimately discovered that his nature was not that of a man of action; he nevertheless ‘knows how full the life of a man can also be today who dedicates himself to action uprooting superfluous and minute aesthetic and metaphysical objections’.<sup>36</sup>

We must also guard against the impression given by Prevelakis’ brief comments that Kazantzakis was hostile to Marxism because of its conception of the new man; Kazantzakis, in Prevelakis’ eyes, personified and represented western tradition while the new type of man, the Marxist, was ignorant of and despised the humanist values of that tradition. For Kazantzakis, the so-called new man, the committed communist, was not new at all. In the final analysis and from a large perspective, Marxism had little or nothing new to offer. Far from being a change of the fighting front of the human battle (as he himself might have thought before his trip to Russia and as the communists themselves might have wanted to believe), communism was another extension of western culture, in fact ‘the most extreme and most logical consequence of bourgeois civilization’.<sup>37</sup>

According to Marx, communism was to be the necessary consequence of the capitalist civilization, the final stage of the material dialectic of history. However, this is not what Kazantzakis had in mind; it is not what he meant when considering communism the logical consequence of bourgeois civilization. What he did mean was that communism, as a faith based on the theoretical interpretations and conceptions of

35. *Toda Raba*, p. 159.

36. *Τετρακόσια γράμματα*, p. 156. We will have occasion to refer again to this essay. Written in Gottesgab in 1929, soon after his return from Russia, this document, together with the ‘Apology’, as Prevelakis himself does not fail to note, is indispensable for becoming acquainted with Kazantzakis’ position concerning Marxism.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Marx, did not lead to the novelty that the dialectical method implies, but merely logically carried some aspects of the bourgeois culture to their final consequences. More specifically, he explicitly pointed to the two basic aspects which comprise its main characteristics: the materialistic conception of life, and the worship of the machine. In fact, if the United States is seen from this perspective (the final achievement of western bourgeois culture), then 'the ideal of Soviet Russia is America',<sup>38</sup> with only one difference: the fairer distribution of material goods. 'The bourgeois civilization, with its development of critical intelligence, demolished all religions and created that which we call science, i.e. rules by which we can know and can subjugate the natural powers. Communism deifies all these fruits of bourgeois endeavour and attempts only to carry out—and does carry out—a more just distribution of material goods.'<sup>39</sup>

For Kazantzakis communism, far from being the creation of a new culture, was only the swan song of the old one, the final stage of the decomposition of bourgeois civilization. 'Communism is the end not the beginning. It has all the symptoms of the end: extreme materialism, hypertrophy of the rational, deadly analysis of every belief which transcends the five senses, deification of practical goals.'<sup>40</sup>

His criticism of the materialism of communism was not limited to the worship of the machine and the emphasis on the practical, but went to its theoretical roots in Marxism. Kazantzakis disagreed vigorously with the most fundamental thesis of Marx's dialectical materialism—the notion that societies are and have been governed by the prevailing means of production; or more generally, that economics constitutes the absolute foundation of the socio-political and spiritual superstructure and is the reason and cause of any change. He agreed that economic factors play a central role in the unfolding of a people's history and that economics is one of the most powerful movers of human life, if for no other reason than that it serves man's basic needs—'man has always the need to eat'. But more often than not there are factors other than economics that dominate and determine the historical unfolding and

38. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 151.

destiny of a people: 'religion, race, historical adventures, the appearance of a great figure'. For example, he did not believe that we can explain the appearance and unexpected triumph of the Mohammedan civilization by appealing exclusively to the economic conditions of the Arab world in the seventh century. 'The same economic conditions had weighed down the people of the Arab race for many centuries . . . and suddenly one man, a great figure, is born . . . the unforeseen is ready every moment to open a different path in history. . . . What sudden invincible force was impelling these people? Certainly not only economic motives but a deeper force, richer and irascible—a faith.'<sup>41</sup> Similarly he did not agree that we can explain the causes responsible for the Christian civilization as economic in character.

According to Kazantzakis, an historian can prove what he wishes, given the weight of his central premise and principles of selection. But if we objectively and impartially look at the history of humanity, we will see that all these causes together 'mould humanity and now one dominates, now the other, now many or all together in hard-to-analyse percentages of contribution'.<sup>42</sup>

Not only did Kazantzakis disagree with Marxism by not considering the economic factors the sole and basic causes in determining the structure and direction of a culture, he also saw them as sometimes being effects—results or outcomes of a number of factors. It is the working together of these factors (such as 'race, luck, climate, wars, an invention and many others') that creates a given set of economic motives and conditions. These conditions are often merely the visible forms of deeper urges and invisible forces—forces which because of their fluidity and opacity cannot be used as easy slogans for the masses.

Finally, he considered it if not totally arbitrary, certainly narrow, to hold with Marxists that art, morality and thought are the effects of economic laws and material conditions and that changes in the latter necessarily bring about changes in the former. Could it perhaps be the case, he asks rhetorically, 'that the moral and spiritual changes are results which pre-exist,

41. *Povota*, pp. 222–3.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 224.

much earlier than the economic change and make their appearance hierarchically—the economic change first and then the more complex ones—morality, art, thought?’<sup>43</sup> It was only, he thought, because the economic changes come to be discerned first that Marxism superficially takes them to be the primary causes and all other changes as their effects.

Above all, it was what he took to be the dogmatism of historical dialectical materialism that offended his sensibility and ran contrary to his own conception of things—its one-sidedness as to what determines historical eras and directs humanity on the one hand, and on the other its ‘prophecy’ as to the definite and permanent solution of man’s problems. Not only, according to Marxism, are the means of production, i.e. the economic factors, the sole causes determining the social and ideological superstructure, the appropriate regulation of which would lead to socialism, but as is well known, the latter will invariably have to pass through two stages of evolutionary unfolding: the stage which Marx calls in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* ‘Crude Communism’ and the stage of ‘Pure Communism’.

Kazantzakis objected both to what he understood to be the idea of the termination of the social evolution in ‘Pure Communism’ and to the promises it was thought to contain. He derogatorily referred to this dogmatic antidialectic contained in the promises of ‘Pure Communism’ as ‘The Iron Law’<sup>44</sup> and considered it to be one of the weakest points of Marxism. For him, as we are going to see shortly, the historical dialectic or ‘the undulating pattern of history’ has no end, passing through a ceaseless series of ‘decays, births, high points, declines, decays’, to an endless renewal of life and civilizations. Although ultimately quite different in his convictions from Engels, he would have agreed with the latter’s statement that ‘all successive historical situations are only transitory stages in an endless course of development from the lower to the higher’.<sup>45</sup>

Kazantzakis’ rejection of the fundamental notions of historical materialism necessarily followed from his rejection of what he considered to be the naïve scientific determinism that

43. Ibid., p. 225.

44. Ibid., p. 221.

45. F. Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by C. P. Dutt (New York, 1900), p. 12.

underlies it. Influenced as he was by Bergson's philosophy, he could not accept the claim of orthodox scientific socialism that social—i.e. human—phenomena can be determined and predicted in the same way as the phenomena of the empirical sciences. The methods of the physical sciences could in no sense be applied to life. If life or life's reality is, as he believed it to be, a ceaselessly changing process, always moving ahead and forever creating newness and novelty, then life's phenomena, unlike the merely physical ones, cannot be taken up and arranged without being drastically distorted; nor can they be framed mathematically. Life is a ceaseless dynamic process; we cannot establish its laws. Laws, he observed, are made from repetitions, while life—and this is its qualitative difference from matter—is continual creation: the birth of something new which was not included in what was previously given. 'But never, under no circumstances, can in life the very same causes repeat themselves and therefore the same effects be predicted. And since the phenomena of life cannot be brought under laws then science, that is to say, systems of laws, cannot possibly exist in the case of social phenomena.'<sup>46</sup> Far from being able to determine and predict the future of social events, a science of society, e.g. scientific socialism, can only interpret past events as past, as finished and dead, after they have already ceased to flow and unfold creatively. Such a science can only purport to anatomize life's cadaver; as such its value is only and significantly retrospective. It can analyse finished events and establish laws; but precisely because we cannot identify the inert 'body of an era with the enormous breath that gives it life',<sup>47</sup> its researches and interpretations cannot become lessons for the future. Therefore, such a science cannot be considered a valuable guide for our thought and action.

We need not consider further his criticism of the theoretical foundations of Marxism, nor, for that matter, need we evaluate it to see that it, along with his explicit denial of being a communist, flies in the face of the previous evidence presented. Were these two sides of Kazantzakis' attitude towards 'the greatest contemporary problem regulating our era'? Was the confusion of his interpreters a reflection of a fundamental

46. *Povota*, pp. 218–19.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 220.



ambiguity in Kazantzakis himself? Was he lying? Or was it the case that the two seemingly contradictory stands reflected two different periods of his development; that the initial enthusiasm of his letters and 'Apology' dwindled in the light of a more critical and mature attitude?

### III

Kazantzakis' criticism of theoretical Marxism did not prevent him from recognizing the real significance of Marx and the crucial place his doctrine occupied in the course of historical reality. He continued to consider Marx the greatest figure of our times. In the essay he sent to Prevelakis he referred to Marx as the 'legislator of the era' and as the 'Supreme Ruler of our times'.<sup>48</sup> Not, as we have seen, because he absolutely agreed with the theoretical aspects of Marxism; but because he saw Marx's doctrine as constituting contemporary reality, as being the signal of the times. Every period which has created a civilization had, according to Kazantzakis, its own slogan. In order for it to have been the appropriate one it had both to answer and exaggerate the needs of the times. Furthermore, the slogan had to be formulated simply. 'For our time', he wrote in the same essay, 'this slogan is, beyond any doubt, the communist slogan. It has all the above characteristics: it answers to and exaggerates today's reality.'<sup>49</sup> As we have seen Kazantzakis explain, life, reality, in and by itself, is too dynamic to have the logical and fixed structures Marx assigned to it. He did not believe that there existed, for instance, two classes so absolutely fixed with such distinct lines of demarcation between them, forming two completely separate camps. Yet Marx served a historical purpose: with a high-handedness verging on arrogance he forced that reality into moulds which he himself had *a priori* carved with rigorous and precise logic. By framing the two classes he helped them abruptly separate, acquire class consciousness, and with it begin to place themselves in camps which his logic had already prescribed. In doing so 'Marx found the proper slogan for our times by means of which he organized the masses: he gave them a faith'.<sup>50</sup>

48. Τετρακόσια γράμματα, 153.

49. Ibid., p. 154.

50. Ibid., p. 154.

The indisputable significance of Marx, according to Kazantzakis, resides precisely in this: in his having provided a faith for his times such that the reality of the times is defined by it. Kazantzakis might not have been in full agreement with the philosophical grounds of the signal, but he recognized it as the overwhelming force determining the contemporary world rhythm: 'For the first time in history, the earth is acquiring a unified consciousness. All races—white, black, yellow, are organized around the same purpose.'<sup>51</sup> He may not have accepted the promises claimed by that faith, but he was convinced that it was preparing the grounds for the final stage of decay of the decomposing bourgeois civilization. In doing so, it was creating a transitional period towards something higher in the climb of the human spirit. It was ushering in an upward movement in the intractable and ever-renewed laws of life and civilization: birth, high point, decline.

The reason Kazantzakis was awed by Russia and the reason he went there was that for him it was the place where the activities of the transitional period were beginning to be enacted. 'where man is striving, seeking, testing, experimenting to find out—to open a path between the old world his soul can no longer tolerate and the new ideal that is struggling in vain to arrive'. For Kazantzakis it was this striving, these efforts to break the moulds of a past that had hardened and become inhuman; it was these moments at which what had turned to dead matter was being transubstantiated by human effort into Spirit, that constituted man's highest, 'holiest' moments, the moments of change and upward climb as he called them. There had been such moments before in man's history. 'Today it is Russia that is opening a path, amidst hunger and blood, in order to raise life higher.' Generalizing the same theme, he sums it up this way:

For years now an unswerving belief has been taking hold of me, lighting up my insides: Someone struggling is climbing uphill from matter to plants, from plants to animals, from animals to man and is fighting for freedom. In every critical historical period, this Struggling One takes on a new face. Today the face it has taken is this: Leader of the World Proletariat.<sup>52</sup>

51. *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography*, p. 567.

52. *Povota*, p. 261.

We should not be misled however, when we try to determine the extent to which, according to Kazantzakis, Russia had opened—or actually discerned the nature of—the path it was trying to open. Although Kazantzakis had repeatedly stated that the ‘amazing Soviet experiment’ was the one which was shaping the great contemporary international reality, that reality was not an end in itself but comprised a stage of transition. ‘We have been experiencing’, he wrote at the end of his book on Russia, ‘from the Russian Revolution onward, the harrowing and bloody labour pains of some higher civilization.’ He left it to be understood that that civilization was not yet born, was not being realized in Russia and was not embodied in the communist ideology or the premises of Marxist theory: ‘We live and therefore do not perceive our times. But centuries hence they will surely not be called a Renaissance but a middle age. A middle age, that is to say, an interregnum: one civilization is breaking and falling, the other is being born. The one is dying, for generations gasping, the other is in labour, for generations labouring.’<sup>53</sup> The civilization which is dying is none other than the western bourgeois civilization, and communism, as Kazantzakis saw it, constitutes the final stage of its dying process. It is here, as we saw earlier, that Kazantzakis places the significance of communism in the ‘undulating pattern of history’. It is the single, latest and most powerful force in the dissolution of a culture which already had its high point and is at the final stage of its downward curve of decline and decay; and at the same time and almost paradoxically it itself is that final stage.

Viewed from the global perspective Kazantzakis was trying to develop, communism has created—or rather is—an interregnum on the other side of which he could see the vague adumbrations of a new era: an era which, although it is to transcend the communist reality we are presently experiencing, cannot be thought of as coming to be realized without having first gone through that reality. Kazantzakis chose, with deliberate ambiguity, to call this new age Metacommunism. He must have had this in mind when he had stated earlier that the communist experiment was opening a new path in order to raise life to a higher order.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 269.

Now, perhaps, we are in a better position to understand Kazantzakis' exhortation in the letter to Prevelakis, in the introduction to the French edition of *Toda Rabà*, and elsewhere, that in the time in which we are living, one ought to be communist. However, he qualifies this view: We must be communists, but enlightened ones, implacable, without any shallow hope or simple-minded, superficial optimism. 'We should not be like the naïve communists who think that happiness and justice will follow upon the triumph of communism.'<sup>54</sup> Therefore, we could say that we ought to be communists first because communism is, as we have seen, what defines contemporary reality; second, because by being communists we will destroy the already crumbling bourgeois civilization and help mankind to move further into the transitional period; and third, because the further we move into that period and draw out the consequences of communism, the sooner we shall go through it and transcend it. 'It is like the driver', Kazantzakis explained, using the same example in more than one place, 'who enters a burning forest. Instead of going back he should double his speed in order to get out of the fire. In the same way, we have entered this fearsome period and we must, as much as we can, stretch the implications of communism to their extreme consequences so that salvation may come sooner. What salvation? The destruction of this world and the beginning of the creation of another, with different foundations, where the worship of the machine, of logic and of practical goals will be considered worthless goods [*sic*]. A new slogan.'<sup>55</sup>

At a time when the world was still in shock from the Bolshevik revolution and when Russia was at its first stage of applying Marxist theory, Kazantzakis was already drawing the consequences of communism and calling for a new signal and a new beginning. He considered it his right and duty as a man of thought to divine the new post-Marxist signal and to detect and salvage the potentialities in communism in order to use them as signposts for the future development of man. 'If, however, we are not men of action, then we have the right, if we can, to wish for, to experience from now on and to divine this meta-

54. *Τετρακόσια γράμματα*, p. 155.

55. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

communist slogan. Communism is the end but naturally like every end it has in it many elements of the future beginning. What are these elements? From all our wishes and needs and presentiments that surround us which ones will survive and be used in the coming civilization? From all these ephemeral visions, which ones have the likelihood of relative immortality? This is the great agony and the great duty of today's creative theorist.<sup>56</sup>

#### IV

Commentators often speak of the influences certain great figures exerted on Kazantzakis' intellectual development and quite as often see that development in terms of clearly defined stages. Kazantzakis himself was partially responsible for this since in more than one place he had explicitly acknowledged his debt to the great men who aided him in his long and 'bloody journey': Christ, Buddha, Nietzsche, Bergson, Lenin, Odysseus. Such admissions on his part, however, given the nature of his thought, are more prone to mislead than to enlighten: they tend to be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that his thought is a mere conglomeration of the philosophical attitudes reflected by these great names. In their attempt to determine the nature, force and time of these influences, commentators have robbed his thought of any claim to originality. Moreover, by considering these influences in terms of clearly demarcated stages, they give the impression that his thought proceeded in a staccato-like manner, undergoing drastic changes at every start of a new influence as the Greek writer first abandoned an old mentor and then embraced a new one. They consequently see his thought as lacking the wholeness and continuity it actually has.

While we have to admit that the figures and the philosophies he himself often acknowledged did have an influence in formulating his thought, none of them was completely adopted by Kazantzakis nor was any one of them completely abandoned. It is closer to the truth to say that each of these philosophies was assimilated by Kazantzakis' mind and was transformed in accordance with that mind's own chemistry to form a world view

56. *Ibid.*, p. 155.

that was uniquely his own. In this sense, aspects of each of these philosophies remained with him to the end of his life. This holds true of Buddhism, Bergsonism, Nietzscheanism, as well as of Marxism.

It would be just as misleading, therefore, to speak of the writer's Marxist or 'left-wing stage' as it would be to speak of his Buddhist, nihilist stages, etc. And this notwithstanding his own assertion in a letter that 'From 1923 to 1933 approximately. . . I belonged to the Left Wing.'<sup>57</sup> Nor would it be completely correct, focusing on that ten-year period, to see it as one in which Kazantzakis' original hopes and embrace of communism in the early 1920s gradually dwindled, reaching a point of disillusionment which by the early 1930s forced his gaze away towards 'metacommunism'.

His notion of 'metacommunism' was with him from the very beginning of that period. In fact this concept first emerged along with his *Spiritual Exercises* which he finished in April 1923, at the very time he was speaking so fervently about Russia. Again, that his outlook did not change and that he considered Russian Communism as part of the transitional stage at the end as well as at the beginning of that 'left-wing' period, while he was still in Germany, has been attested by the letters to his first wife. As early as 1923 he spoke of it in terms of 'The Middle Ages'. The same idea is stated in his 'The Social Problem',<sup>58</sup> published in February 1925. Finally, no such thing as disillusionment took place in him because, from the outset, long before his trip to Russia and amidst his enthusiastic letters, he wrote to his wife in 1922 that he 'had not the slightest *illusion* about the present reality in Russia'.

Ultimately, there are two ways that this period affected Kazantzakis. First, it brought him to the clear realization that he was not a man of concrete action, a realization which was to be forced on him once again in 1945 when as Minister he tried to bring together the various Greek socialist factions into one party. Secondly, because he witnessed, and to some extent partook of the communist reality, this period afforded him the opportunity to formulate communism's significance and to

57. Nikos Kazantzakis and His *Odyssey*, p. 160.

58. 'Ο Καζαντζάκης μιλεί για Θεό, ed. K. Mitsotakis (Athens, 1965), pp. 126–33.

articulate the various aspects of that significance in regard to human history and to man. In other words, it gave him the chance to clarify and formulate those ideas which he had, perhaps too abruptly, expressed in his letters early in that period. His stance in regard to that reality and the metaphysics on which it was based never substantially changed during that period, nor during any other period to the end of his life. We have already seen his criticism of theoretical Marxism. His objection that the fundamental metaphysical contentions of Marxism are one-sided and dogmatic, and his attitudes towards the unbending faith of orthodox communists, whom he considered naïve, remained with him to the very end and explain why his books were banned in Russia. At the same time, however, his deep antipathy toward the decadent values of capitalism; his growing aversion toward imperialism and colonialism; his view that communism was the single reality defining the times, a reality which will have to be traversed if man is to be ushered into a new and higher era—all these convictions which admittedly grew during that ‘left-wing’ period were not abandoned with that period but persisted and solidified in the years to come, as his activities and writing show. And of course they were the reason for his being persecuted by every single rightist government in Greece.

In 1944, immediately after a period of isolation on the island of Aegina, he joined the democratic, socialist and resistance groups which had surfaced soon after the war. In May 1945, he was elected the first president of the ΣΕΕ—Σοσιαλιστική Έργατική Ένωση (Socialist Labour Union). The same year he became Minister without portfolio—a position which he resigned a few months later. In the summer of 1946, while in England, a plebiscite brought back the king to Greece. In the fall he moved to France. He was never to see Greece again.

Between the first and second civil wars in Greece, Kazantzakis became one of the few bearers of a Greek socialist democratic ideology. Both as leader of the ‘Socialist Labour Union’ and as minister, in speeches and announcements and press conferences, he put forth a socialist political ideology whose roots went directly and undeniably back to his views of ‘The Social Problem’ 1925 and to his ‘Apology’. He repeated the significance of the historical moment humanity was passing

through, the necessity of destroying the moulds of the old bourgeois civilization, the need to struggle for man's development; he insisted that such development is grounded not merely in economic emancipation but in the emancipation of the 'light that exists within every man and every people . . .'<sup>59</sup> 'Only on psychological foundations can a civilization be solidified. The economic and political life is always regulated by a progress of man's soul.'<sup>60</sup> To the end of his life he remained true to what in the early 1920s he had called his new development—his awakening to internationalism. From their very beginning he favoured the anti-colonial revolutions which were breaking out in the aftermath of World War II and he later became a supporter of the first and second international conferences which were being organized in Athens to prepare the ground for the First International Anti-colonial Congress. It is the equality, cooperation and freedom of the world's people that he spoke of when he addressed, a few months before his death, the International Peace Committee, on the occasion of his receiving the Peace Award in Vienna. In a passage whose resemblance to the letters of the early 1920s is undeniable, he states:

One world staggers, ready to fall, another is being raised. Countless are the forms of destruction and reconstruction which are all around us. That is why man's responsibility is great today. He has realized that any one of his actions may affect the whole human destiny. He knows that men, black, white, yellow, are one. [If] at the other end of the world someone is hungry, we are to blame; we cannot be free if at the end of the world someone still remains a slave.<sup>61</sup>

Disillusioned with practical politics, discouraged by the attitudes of the great powers, embittered by the situation in Greece, which was 'groaning under the fascist yoke', self-exiled in southern France, Kazantzakis turned to that labour with which he was most at home; he turned, this time resolutely, to his literary activity. With the exception of *Zorba the Greek* all of his

59. From a speech on the BBC on 18 July 1946. *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography*, p. 443.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 443.

61. Pouliopoulos, *op. cit.*, p. 20.



great novels date from this time on. His writing of the novels, however, should not be seen as an aesthetic diversion on his part. It neither brought an end to his role as an enlightener of the people nor did it mean the abandonment of those Marxist ideas which he had all along deemed progressive. As a novelist, he channelled those ideas through the medium of art, embodying them in the heroes and situations of his novels. The abstract statements of his travel books, letters and all the other documents we have considered became concretized and enfolded in the dramas of his stories.

As early as in his 'Apology' we have seen him state that he took it to be his duty to articulate a clear idea of the historical moment we were passing through by enlightening the people and giving a new and loftier content to the conceptions of work, justice and virtue. In his novels his protagonists Christ, Saint Francis, Manolios, Father Fotis and Father Yanaros become the concrete embodiments of that higher moment we are going through in terms of a struggle whereby one civilization is about to fall and another about to begin. This struggle is concretely and passionately presented in the *Greek Passion* and *The Fratricides* in the struggle between those who believe that 'the world rests on four pillars—religion, country, honour and property'<sup>62</sup>—and those for whom such a world is 'unjust and wicked . . . and must perish'.<sup>63</sup> We need only to read these two novels to be convinced that Kazantzakis was neither bourgeois, fascist, red or immoral. These works suffice to contradict the claim that he was an egomaniac, oblivious to the fate of others. For in them, as in all his books, what Kazantzakis did is what he himself professed:

I compel myself in my work to set heroic models before the people, not fictitious heroes who never existed, but those who have emerged from the vitals of my race. They alone incarnate the claims and the hopes of the famished and the persecuted and are capable of showing the people the way to salvation.<sup>64</sup>

That salvation, Kazantzakis was convinced, could not be found within the capitalist world. And if, as he was equally convinced,

62. Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Greek Passion*, trans. by J. Griffin (New York, 1953), pp. 259–60.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 422.

64. *Nikos Kazantzakis: A Biography*, p. 530.

communism did not afford us the new beginning, at least it was the end of an era beyond which an opening of a new path could, however vaguely, be envisioned.

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